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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of an initial exploration into the attitudes and practices of some selected Canadian distance educators regarding a learner-centered view of education. Twenty-nine Canadian distance education teachers and administrators responded to questionnaires concerning attitudes toward distance education, student autonomy in learning, student and teacher roles in learning, and course and materials design. Comments in regard to learner centered instruction were also solicited. The results of the survey indicate that, while the respondents support and recognize student views and initiatives in program design and implementation, they do not necessarily advocate complete learner controlled instruction. It is concluded that a balanced approach is needed that would take into account the complexity of the distance education process, including the nature of course content, course delivery methods, and student backgrounds. It is suggested that future research may address the attitudinal and andragogical issues in greater detail. (26 references) (DB)

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Learner Centredness:

Views of Canadian Distance Education Educators

Elizabeth Burge
Joan Howard

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

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INTRODUCTION

This article reports the results of an initial exploration into the attitudes and practices of some Canadian distance educators regarding a learner-centred view of education. The survey was undertaken in response to an invitation to contribute to the 1988 annual conference of the Scottish Institute of Adult and Continuing Education, held at the University of Aberdeen, June 30 - July 2, 1988.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

'Of course all teaching is learner-centred -- after all, who's sitting in the classroom?' Such a casual definition of learner-centredness is of course much too simplistic, but for those who have tried facilitating adult learning in a learner-centred context, the definitions become less easy. Does learner-centredness refer to content that the student wants to learn? to a focus on meaningful learning (Ausubel 1963)? to a focus on the cognitive processes (Mandler 1985; West and Pines 1985)? to learning styles (Keefe 1987) or learning strategies (Tessmer and Jonassen 1988)? Does it refer to learner control and diminished teacher status and respect? to a classroom free of ground rules? Or does it refer to something more holistic and less predictable, the engagement of the whole learner and her/his academic and personal development?

The concept of learner-centredness is not new but it has prompted some contemporary adult educators to expand its definitions and offer some detailed assumptions and conditions for its application. Here we deal only with several writers who we think have taken the whole learner approach, as distinct, say, from cognitive psychologists who focus on cognition (West and Pines 1985). Two U.K.

educators, Brandes and Ginnis (1986), in a book that presents an excellent balance of principle and practicality, trace the development of a learner-centred view from Socrates in 400 B.C.: 'he shall share the enquiry with me', to Dewey in 1938 '...learning through experience ... cultivation of individuality ... acquaintance with a changing world...', to Bennett's comparison in 1976 of traditional and progressive education (Bennett 1976). Carl Rogers analyzed the conditions for and outcomes of significant learning within a client-centred therapeutic relationship and then argued that similar conditions should prevail in an educational context (Rogers 1961). Malcolm Knowles, not without criticism (Burge 1988), drew distinctions between andragogy and pedagogy to illuminate his focus on the adulthood of the learner and the requisite principles for the design of adult learning (Knowles 1980). Other writers have used a variety of continua, e.g. open-closed, traditional-progressive, didactic-participatory, to show how a primary concern for the student may contrast with a primary concern for the teacher or the course content (Bennett 1976; Lewis 1986).

Brandes and Ginnis add their own two distinctions to Bennett's contrast of traditional and progressive. They argue that valuing the learning process and providing equal emphasis to cognitive and affective domains need to be added to Bennett's characteristics of progressive schooling (Brandes and Ginnis 1986). Brandes and Ginnis identify seven major principles for student-centred learning which are worth listing here for their value as a summary for a complex issue: 'the learner has full responsibility for her own learning ... the subject matter has relevance and meaning for the learner ... involvement and participation are necessary for learning ... the relationship between learners (should show helping styles and learner self-responsibility) ... (the) teacher (is) a facilitator and resource

person ... (the) learner sees himself differently as a result of the learning experience ... the learner experiences confluence ... affective and cognitive domains flow together' (Brandes and Ginnis 1986:12-17). In short, the authors argue that 'student-centred learning is not a bag of tricks; it is about attitudes and relationships ... (it is about students having) the right to own their own learning.'

Brandes and Ginnis are not the only U.K. writers to come to grips with the complexities and ambiguities of taking a learner-centred view. Also, in distance education world-wide, this approach has attracted experiments and writings designed to acknowledge the adulthood of learners -- in terms of life experience, developmental stages, the functions of choice and self-responsibility in learning, the stance of interdependence (as distinct from teacher-dependence), and changed, but no less important, roles for the teacher (Northedge 1976; Taylor and Kaye 1986; Thorpe and Grugeon 1987; Strang 1987). Strang's definition is succinct and comprehensive:

> (a person-centred model) ... focusses attention on the students as human beings. Rather than considering them solely as learning machines the model encourages recognition of qualities such as the propensity to adopt attitudes, to have intentions, and to make decisions. (Strang 1987:27)

Across the Atlantic many adult educators and some distance educators have outlined assumptions and conditions associated with learner-centredness (Knowles 1980; Combs 1974; Maclean 1987; Boud & Griffin 1987; Griffin 1988; Burge 1988). Maclean, for example, synthesizes a set of ten assumptions from the work of pioneers in the field and contributes her own five concepts for person-centred learning -- the emergent design of course process, interdependence or supportive climate, a reflective, creative and open-ended knowledge system, and reflection

and critical self-assessment (Maclean 1987). Her definition of person-centred learning is as direct and broad as Strang's:

> ...it emphasises helping students to learn and thus begins with a concern for what the learner experiences rather than the factors that contribute to good instruction. Of primary importance is the encouragement of learner autonomy and person responsibility. Emphasis is placed on personal meaning and the value of knowledge generated through experience. (Maclean 1987:128-9)

Do not be fooled however by the apparent simplicity or 'parenthood and apple pie' nature of these definitions. They aim high and their implementation requires significantly changed relationships between learner and teacher, high degrees of skill from both, and the ability to deal with the inevitable resistances that accompany change. One of the authors recently experienced almost all the resistances to change from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred view as listed by Brandes and Ginnis as she guided a group of adult learners out of their passive, dependent, teacher-centred model and into a proactive, interdependent and learner-centred model. The process was not easy but ultimately was very rewarding for almost all concerned.

In the context of Canadian conferences on distance education, the concept of learner-centredness has drawn a philosophical recognition that the learner deserves significant attention from course designers, tutors, counsellors, librarians, etc.; but in practice there are doubts and a lack of knowledge about the extent to which educators actually implement a learner-centred view. There is certainly ambiguity and defensiveness about the extension of a learner-centred view into the area of gender-related issues, a topic not yet well explored in any literature base (Faith 1988). Maclean's thinking, for example, has not been echoed in assessments of the

Canadian distance education experience (Coldeway 1986), except in one recent review of the concept of andragogy and its applicability to distance education (Burge 1988). That review went as far as suggesting very concrete and generalized guidelines for facilitators regardless of context and were grouped under a revised set of "R's" -- Responsibility, Relevance, Relationships and Rewards, all of which, it was argued, pose challenges for distance learners, tutors and course designers. The guidelines were designed to respond in part to what we believe are the key components of a learner-centred view: the learner's ability, resources and opportunities for access to learning; the choices in course content (what is learned) and course process (how it is learned); the relationships between theory and immediate, practical problems to be solved or tasks to be carried out, and between one's own experience and knowledge and that of others; the diversity in how individual preferences in learning styles and needs are shown, and in the levels of adult development reached, in terms of cognitve, psychosocial, physical and moral development; and the support mechanisms needed and available for success in a course. Those components guided the development of a questionnaire for this initial survey of selected Canadian distance educators. We are indebted to Dr. Doug Hart for his critical help in the preparation of the questionnaire.

RESULTS

Profile of Respondents

A total of thirty-five questionnaires were sent to selected academic personnel, both teachers and administrators, involved in distance education across Canada. The selection was based on first hand knowledge of these practitioners -- the size and variety of their programs, their length of experience in the field, and their likely interest in this topic. Twenty-nine responses were received, a response

rate of 83%. In keeping with current statistical reporting practices we will report "real" response figures rather than percentage figures since the number of responses is under the accepted minimum of thirty for percentage descriptors.

Of the twenty-nine respondents, male respondents are in the majority with nineteen responses, as opposed to ten responses from female distance education personnel. The respondents represent institutions offering distance education programs across Canada: thirteen respondents from Western Canada (British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba); fourteen from Eastern Canada (Ontario, Quebec); and two from Atlantic Canada.

Programmes at the university level are well-represented by twenty-five respondents: twenty-two at the undergraduate and three at the graduate level. Other respondents represent programmes offered by Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology and Technical and Vocational Institutes. One respondent is a learning designer with Contact North/Contact Nord of Northeastern Ontario, a communications network used by educational institutions.

The types of courses referred to by respondents in question 6 mirror the university bias as indicated above. Out of a total of sixty-five distance education courses considered by respondents for the questionnaire, over half (38) were within the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences fields. Ten courses were in the area of the General Sciences. Only a few applied courses in Nursing (7), Education (6), and Business (4) were reported.

General Attitudes

In the introductory section of the questionnaire, questions 1 to 5, respondents were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with a series of general statements relating to distance education. Some statements are phrased in a positive and some in a negative voice. Respondents were offered a six-point response scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" and including both a "neutral" and a "can't say" option.

The analysis of responses to this introductory section proved a difficult task. The complexities of the issues are reflected here in ambivalent and contradictory attitudes which do not lend themselves easily to generalized responses. We can, however, distinguish several main areas in which a consensus was expressed.

Respondents clearly support, in theory at least, the need to recognize and accommodate student views and initiative in program design and implementation. Nineteen out of twenty-nine respondents disagree with the view expressed in item 1(a) that 'students have to adapt themselves to courses; courses cannot be adapted to individual students or groups of students'. Similarly, seventeen responses to item 1(b) support the belief that individual student needs can be addressed in distance education courses as well as in regular courses. Twenty-one respondents fully support the concept of student involvement in planning their own learning (item 1(o)).

This generally student-centred viewpoint is mediated, however, by other responses: in item 1(k), respondents do not agree that 'students should always be helped to negotiate their own goals for learning' (thirteen "disagree" and nine

respondents choose to remain "neutral"); in item 1(m), with regard to negotiating learning activities; the majority of respondents disagree with the premise that "students must always be given the opportunity to negotiate their own learning activities" (nineteen "disagree" and four are "neutral").

Some opportunities for negotiation are reported in question 2, particularly with regard to dates: deadline dates for completion of assignments, and course starting date. The greatest degree of flexibility/negotiation is shown for assignment deadlines with seventeen respondents reporting that this "almost always" or "sometimes" occurs; fourteen respondents indicate that course starting date can be negotiated. Some element of choice is reported, although limited, within content topic areas for the type of projects or assignments to be completed, and specific problems or issues to be dealt with under each topic.

The Role of the Student's Life and Experience

Respondents are moderately supportive of the view that the student's past life experience and current environment have a role to play in the distance education student's approach to learning. Students, the majority agrees, 'are encouraged to assess, even challenge, views set out in the course in terms of their own experience'. However, twenty-two respondents then agree that course assignments are designed primarily 'to deepen students' understanding of course content in and of itself', thus presenting an evident contradiction. A misinterpretation of the statements by respondents combines with the underlying ambivalence to this issue to make further analysis impossible.

Course and Materials Design

The design of course materials plays a major role in any attempt to put a learner-centred approach into practice. Responses in this area are again somewhat contradictory. Twenty-two respondents feel strongly that it is 'the responsibility of the course writer/s or tutor to help the student learn study skills' and furthermore, this theoretical support seems to be supported in practice as the majority of respondents report that instructions in learning/study skills are included in the course package sent to students (nineteen respondents). On the other hand, 'Course content information is given in print format only' report the majority of respondents, indicating that variety and flexibility of format is not yet a reality for all respondents. Workshops for face-to-face interaction are not planned in the majority of cases (eight respondents report "sometimes", but thirteen report "never").

Course evaluation is carried out almost always at the end of the course (twenty-three respondents): on-going student feedback about a course design "sometimes" occurs (eighteen respondents). Respondents report that non-instructional counselling is available in some cases (seventeen respondents). They also fully support library research as an important component of the course (twenty-four respondents encourage students 'to regard library staff as active resources for the course'), although, in contradiction to the above, nineteen respondents indicate that students 'can get by in their studies without help from the library'.

The second part of the questionnaire consists of open-ended questions. Questions 7 and 8 solicited respondents' personal views and invited them to define three different orientations to education - a course-centred, an institution-centred and a learner-centred orientation.

A Course Writer-Centred Orientation

In defining a course writer's orientation, many respondents referred specifically to "control" over the presentation of content material held by the course specialist or writer (ten respondents). Six respondents defined the approach as discipline-centred, its main concern being the subject matter itself and its main goal the transmission of information. Five respondents viewed the approach as a personal expression of the course writer, even to the point of presenting an idiosyncratic view of the course. Other comments, made by one or two respondents only, included the fact that learning activities and assignments would not be negotiable by students; that this approach can simply be a transfer of a classroom lecture series to a distance education format; and, finally, a vote of confidence that a high quality course can result from this orientation.

The comments reflected the intense feelings generated by this issue. They ranged from highly emotional to carefully methodical: 'sometimes our writers become so enamoured with their deathless prose it takes a crowbar to pry them loose. ... nothing matters but their ego and the miracle they have created'; and 'a course writer-centred orientation occurs when an author-instructor defines objectives and evaluates achievement acoerding to personal standards based upon relevant professional background and experience, influenced to some extent by imposed or perceived student or institutional needs'.

An Institution-Centred Orientation

Definitions of this approach focused on "standardization", or the "do it our way or no way" syndrome: standardized criteria for course admission, for course starting and ending dates, for evaluation of student progress; standardized approaches to teaching methodology, assignment completion, and student assessment; standardized formats of program planning, course development and materials design. One respondent defined an institution-centred view as a 'primacy of the bureaucracy, where efficiency and cost effectiveness predominate at the expense of flexibility in meeting individual needs'. Respondents pointed out that the high level of administrative structure associated with this orientation is indeed a convenience for the institution, but at the same time, it creates a situation in which the distance education student is 'shoe horned into a fixed mode of deadlines which were created for full-time, on-campus students'.

Some of the positive aspects of the institution-centred orientation relate also to the same issue of standardization. According to some respondents, clearly-defined and standardized procedures of registration, enrollment and evaluation are often welcomed by the distance education student who is perceived as wanting as little confusion as possible in the learning environment. Programs and courses delivered in an approved and consistent manner may foster a better experience for both teacher and student and, in turn, lend further support to the academic reputation of the institution through 'institutional standards that often translate into the "quality" or reputation of the degree attained'.

Learner-Centred Orientation

In defining a learner-centred orientation to education, the majority of respondents placed the learner's needs at the centre of the entire teaching/learning process. The learner is seen as a complex interactor with a past, a present and a future. A learner's needs are interpreted broadly to include ongoing learning skills in a wide sense -- as stated by one respondent, 'to stimulate self-directed lifelong learning'. Respondents agree that the individual diversity of students must be taken into account - their varying educational backgrounds, work experiences, learning styles and present life situations. As expressed by one respondent, 'a student's life experience is relevant to every facet of the learning process and ... course design, curriculum choices, instructional and evaluation methods and student support services will take student diversity into account'. The relevance of students' past life experience is seen as central to this orientation: the teaching process must take into account 'the whole learner in the whole environment'.

The second major issue in a learner-centred orientation as defined by respondents is that of control, or freedom of choice over available options. The ability to choose for her/himself many of the elements that combine to form the learning environment puts the learner squarely in the centre of her/his own learning process and directly responsible for it. The learner should have, according to one respondent, 'strong input into the choice of components required to achieve these (educational) goals'. Choices are mandatory in this orientation, choices in terms of content (course design overall goals and learning objectives, sequence and choice of topics), learning activities (types and format of activities), time management (deadlines for course assignments, course starting and completion dates) and evaluation (types and time of asessment).

The third major issue mentioned by respondents is that of student feedback and the degree of importance attached to the responses and reactions of students to course design and implementation. 'Student input at all levels' is considered by many as a necessity in this approach so that teachers and administrators are aware of the impact and effectiveness of both materials and methodology. An on-going dialogue between the learner and the instructor can maximize the effectiveness of the learning process, they report, and regular two-way communication can thus become a form of negotiation between equal partners. The result is greater confidence and skills of learners as proactive adults who are able to take responsibility for their own learning experiences. One respondent aptly defined the interdependence of instructor and learner: 'we (the instructors) take responsibility for creating effective learning materials and supports, and students take responsibility for committing to that process'.

Advantages and Disadvantages of a Learner-Centred Orientation

A. For the Learner

Questions 9 and 10 were also open-ended and asked for advantages and disadvantages of a learner-centred view. All respondents support the view that a learner-centred orientation is unquestionably relevant to the needs of the individual student. 'The learner will learn what he or she requires and not what someone else thinks they require'. They agree on the importance of this approach for the adult learner who 'can map and pursue a course designed primarily with his/her particular needs in mind'. With the opportunity to exert greater control on elements of the learning environment comes an increased sense of responsibility and self-direction, they report. Learning then becomes 'more effective and more enjoyable'. Several respondents also note that it is 'reassuring' for adult learners to

have their past life experience acknowledged as an important database for the learning process. Such reassurance 'is likely to result in confidence-building', states one respondent who continues on to say that this may, in turn, lead to greater success in the program or course and an increased 'sense of achievement'. Making meaningful choices means that 'the learner would not have the feeling of "plodding through" materials that are not of interest but had to be mastered for examination purposes', states another respondent.

There are, on the other hand, some drawbacks to this learner-centred approach. Respondents are aware that theory is one thing but practice is another. As one respondent points out, it is a worthy goal for students to take responsibility for their progress in learning, 'but (it is) not something that most students are capable of doing right away'. Learners may be required 'to take responsibilities they don't want to handle' and those who lack the necessary self-confidence might find themselves 'inhibited at first'. One respondent underlines the importance of counselling and general support services for adult learners, pointing out that 'unless considerable non-instructional help is provided, a student risks becoming lost and not achieving his/her goals'. Furthermore, if a student 'becomes too self-indulgent', according to one respondent, he or she may lose out on many worthwhile substantive aspects of education. 'The main disadvantage', states another, 'is the fact that the learner ... is not in a position to know what he/she needs to complete a progamme of studies ... and could end up with a truncated, haphazard programme that fails miserably to achieve the goals set out in the first place'.

B. For the Course Design Team

The course design team can also share in the benefits of a learner-centred orientation according to respondents. In devising new ways in which to incorporate individual learning styles, activity options and assessment choices in the design of course materials, the course planners/designers/writers can experience 'the stimulation of a more complex activity'. The opportunity to go beyond pure academic criteria can 'challenge the imagination' of the course developers. Freedom from the constraints of traditional methods of content presentation will allow the course design team to break out of the rigid sequencing of information, to produce materials in varying formats with flexible activities and personalized student assessment methods.

Some respondents mentioned that the open lines of communication favoured by this approach should provide constructive feedback which can then lead to on-going improvements in course design. The course design team 'can obtain satisfaction' by creating educational materials that can adapt to the changing needs of the adult learners and always remain up-to-date.

Respondents do not, however, underestimate the difficulties involved in developing materials to foster the learner-centred approach: 'it's tougher the more perspectives that have to be considered'. Many are unclear as to how the needs of the learner will be assessed, how to provide 'sufficient variety of educational processes and resources', how to deal with the 'lack of predictability' inherent in such an approach, how to deal with a 'very large target population' and how to avoid 'high costs and long development time'. Some, in fact, 'find few advantages for the course team'. These respondents feel that 'their task would become

extremely difficult since ... a whole range of potential options (would have to be developed) to meet an equally large range of interests and goals'.

C. For the Tutor

Most respondents see a number of advantages for the tutor in a learner-centred orientation. They note, first and foremost, that 'the tutor's role becomes significantly more important as the options for students are increased'. Secondly, as the role of the tutor expands to deal with a greater variety of issues and concerns, the tutor may find him/herself in 'a supportive role rather than that of a marker'. The teaching experience can them become 'more effective and enjoyable' with the tutor as a partner in the learning process, not an authority figure. The tutor 'may actually feel needed', states one respondent. Most respondents recognize the benefits that can be obtained by both tutor and student from paying greater attention to the needs of individual students. A learner-centred orientation that 'will allow for and adapt to individual needs, goals and problems' may encourage and motivate so that 'the student might well achieve success'.

As in the case of the course design team earlier, many of the advantages of the learner-centred orientation cited for tutors can at the same time represent disadvantages. Evidently, 'more work is involved as (the tutor interacts at) a higher level of decision-making'. This may be seen as an advantage or a disadvantage. Respondents mention issues such as time allocation and workload -- 'too time consuming', higher costs -- 'much more expensive', development of tutors' interactional skills --'may make demands on skills he or she is lacking'. All these issues pose problems in the actual implementation of a learner-centred orientation. 'When part of the responsibility for a learner's success lies with you,

you must commit more of your time and efforts to the course. ... You can't distance yourself from them and remain comfortably intellectual.'

Conclusion

Nineteen respondents chose to elaborate their views by making additional comments in question 11. From these comments, several issues and concerns emerged, the main issue being the need for a balanced approach which would take into consideration the many and diverse aspects of the distance education process including the nature of the course content, the course delivery methods, the level of the course and the student's academic background. Finding a logical and workable balancing point between rigid institutional control and standardized procedures and total freedom and flexiblity for the student is not considered an easy task.

What does emerge from comments is a recognition of the complexity of the educational process, in particular for distance education modes of delivery, and the knowledge that responsibility in this enterprise is shared among all participants.

We have acknowledged some limitations of the survey instrument and the selective rather than total scope of recipients of the questionnaire. However, this initial foray into beliefs and practices around a learner-centred view needs to be followed with a revised questionnaire administered to more inclusive populations and across several countries.

WHERE NEXT?

It is evident from our initial survey that there is scope for much research, particularly within a naturalistic paradigm (Lincoln and Guba 1985), into the extent to which a learner-centred view is acceptable and applicable to distance education practice. Given the increasing use of data access and communications technologies it would appear that technically such a view is feasible. But the attitudinal and andragogical issues may be much more difficult to deal with, even given the existence of published guidelines for learning facilitation. Some solutions should come from research into questions such as these: How do learners see themselves vis-à-vis the role of their tutors? Where do learners assign responsibility for a successful course? Do they value their own construction of knowledge? How are links developed between the cognitive and affective processes in learning? Are learners making any significant decisions about their own learning? What resistances and rewards would apply to educators? Answers to these questions should help both distance mode and face-to-face mode adult educators expand our notions of teaching and professional responsibility so that a learner-centred view is constructive and not threatening.

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Profile of Authors

Elizabeth Burge is Head of the Instructional Resources Development Unit at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) which is the Graduate School of Education of the University of Toronto. She facilitates adult learning in on-campus and distance mode courses.

Joan Howard is a Senior Research Officer at OISE. She has worked on projects related to distance education, French as a second language and English as a second language.